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Reviews

Made in Nunavut: An Experiment in Decentralized Government, Jack Hicks and Graham White, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 2015, 375 p.

When Jack Anawak publicly spoke out in 2003 against a Cabinet decision to transfer public service positions from his community of Rankin Inlet to Baker Lake, he was a minister in the Government of Nunavut (GN). His statement was a clear breach of the convention of Cabinet solidarity; Anawak was subsequently stripped of his ministerial portfolios and removed from the Executive Council. I was then in my first professional job, working in the GN's Cabinet office. The incident remains, for me, a live example of Canadian constitutional conventions applied and debated in public. It is also a striking example of two decades of political quarrels in Nunavut over the policy of 'decentralization'.

Nunavut's decision to organize its territorial government with a "radically decentralized or deconcentrated organizational model" is this book's "central theme" (12). How decision makers and administrators arrived at and implemented this political and administrative arrangement is described in considerable detail. It is brought to life by examining debates over the promise, design, cost, application, and evaluation of decentralization. What results is really the most comprehensive documentation to date of the creation of a new territorial government in Canada's eastern Arctic.

The story unfolds chronologically. It begins with the closing phases of negotiating the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA), which included Article 4 to establish a public government for all residents of the eastern Arctic rather than a self-government only for Inuit, and runs through 2014 with the most recent available statistics on the GN public service. Approximately 20 pages are devoted early on to terminology and a survey of the comparative literature on deconcentrated public administrations; however brief, this overview sets a crucial context for the reader to understand how politicians, bureaucrats and eventually consultants

could themselves interpret, reinterpret, and sometimes misinterpret what is 'decentralization'.

Fully 50 per cent of this book is devoted to the period 1993 – 1999; that is, after the signing of the NLCA through until the opening of the GN. It was during this time that political and bureaucratic actors – occupying committees, offices, secretariats, divisions, and commissions - did research, wrote reports, attended meetings, attended more meetings, and debated what one official called 'the impossible' - the creation of a new sub-national government in Canada.

The book's narrative and analysis is of a style characteristic of these learned authors: excruciatingly well-documented, faithful yet skeptical, and speckled with wry anecdotes.

In totality though, I must express disappointment with *Made in Nunavut*. In doing so, I realize that I'm probably expressing a deeper frustration with decades of studies on the politics of the Canadian North. *Made in Nunavut* is yet another atheoretical description of northern people, institutions and events.¹ As with so many earlier book length studies of northern politics, no attempt is made to use these cases to advance our theoretical understanding of public administration or political science. What does the Nunavut experience with decentralization tell us about principal-agent theory? How about theories of policy failure? Or the literature on implementation?

A purely descriptive account would perhaps be less disconcerting if the authors did not present such a bold thesis.

Key to the argument of Hicks and White is the closing sentence of the first chapter: "Overall, decentralization has proved at least as successful (or unsuccessful, depending on one's degree of pessimism) as the GN as whole and that lack of competence, vision, and leadership among Nunavut's political and bureaucratic elite has far more to do with the GN's problems than does decentralization" (23).

1 Henderson, Ailsa: *Nunavut: Rethinking Political Culture* (University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

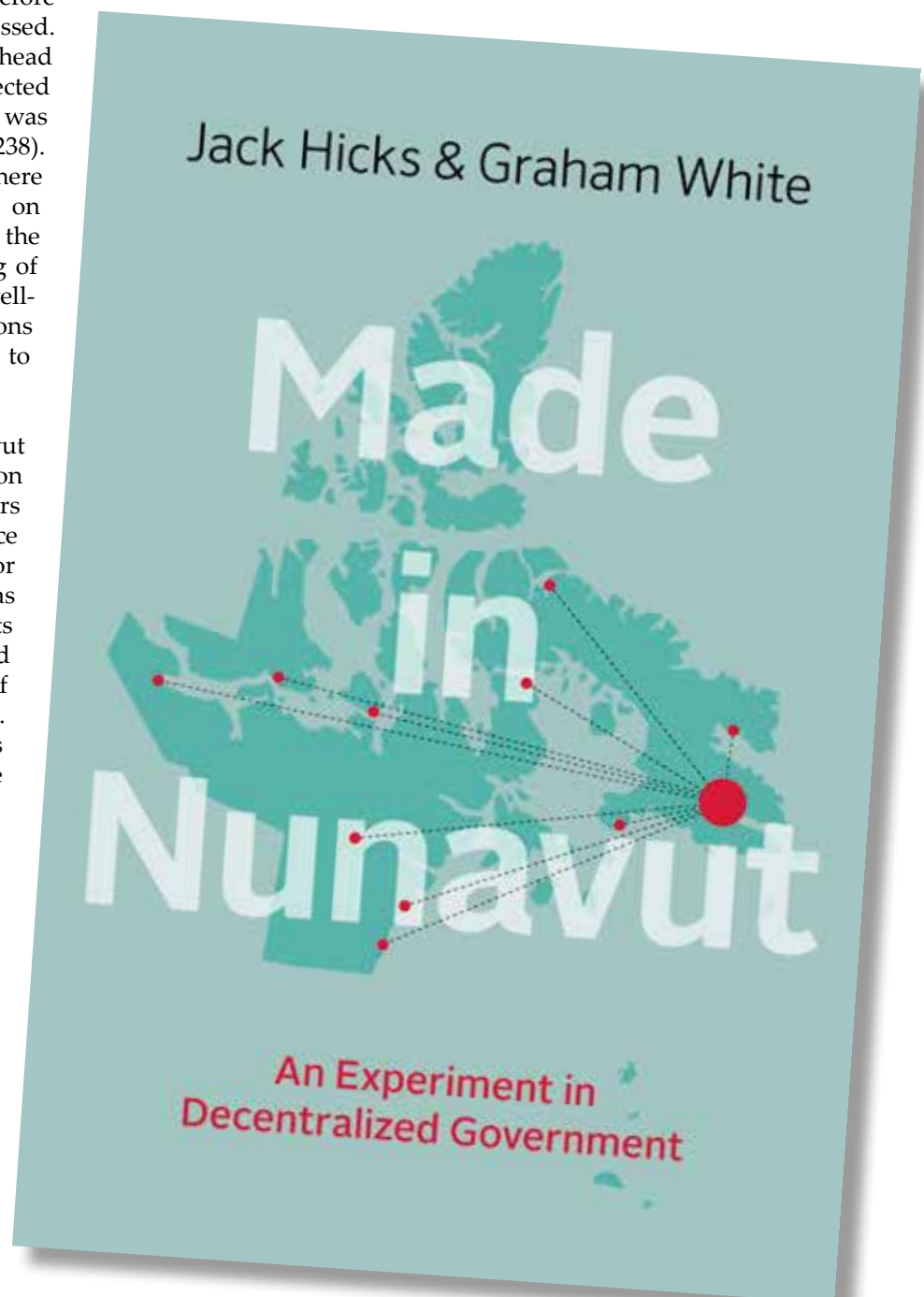
This thesis statement sets a double burden of proof upon the authors. They need to prove that (a) decentralization is over subscribed as the primary cause of policy failure in Nunavut, and (b) that it is the shortcomings of 'the players' (their term) that are to blame for the GN's problems. Let's employ the evidence rendered by Hicks and White to examine these two claims.

Is decentralization a leading cause of policy failure or is it emblematic of deeper problems? First, prospective readers should be warned before reaching page 237 that it takes a bit of context setting before this question is directly addressed. When the thesis is confronted head on, the authors contend, for elected politicians, "decentralization was first and foremost about jobs" (238). They cite numerous examples where the political debate turned - not on bringing government closer to the people - but rather on the sharing of 'political gold', in the form of well-paying public service positions allocated across Nunavut to 'decentralized communities'.

Policy failure in Nunavut is often reflexively blamed on decentralization, but the authors show there is little casual evidence to support these claims. For example, the entire government has struggled to attract civil servants in the licensed professions and technical fields, regardless of position location (e.g., 266 and 306). Issues with recruitment as well as staff housing and training have persisted in Iqaluit as much as in the decentralized communities. Even with a deconcentrated distribution of public service positions across the territory, the authors rightly point out that government decisions are still made by a small number of individuals in Iqaluit: the Executive Council. No quantity of clerks and technicians working across Nunavut's communities could compete with the power of Cabinet government (282).

Hicks and White convincingly demonstrate that decentralization is too often a scapegoat for policy failure in Nunavut.

The second claim made by Hicks and White is that the real reason for the GN's problems is "lack of competence, vision, and leadership among Nunavut's political and bureaucratic elite." The authors establish no problem definition or criteria to examine what constitutes insufficient competence, vision, and leadership. Moreover, two-thirds of the book is completed before this part of the thesis is tested.



In the last three chapters, those focused on the implementation and evaluation of decentralization, a number of the author's observations refute their own thesis. For example, the authors contend: "Whatever the GN's policy successes and failures, it cannot be said that its political and bureaucratic leadership lacked a clear, comprehensive, and ambitious programmatic philosophy" (240). Hicks and White observe that "the GN may be faulted for inadequacies in implementation but at least clear, strong policy goals were enshrined in legislation" (243). No one would dispute that there have been policy failures, "[b]ut these discouraging outcomes have not occurred for want of trying" (246). When it was pointed out early in the first government of Paul Okalik (1999-2004) that there was no dedicated minister or administrative body to oversee the decentralization effort, the Premier established a secretariat in his own department, led first by a senior official who went on to become a federal cabinet minister, and then by one who is currently the government's Secretary to the Cabinet.

Sometimes the analysis is simply contradictory. The "limited impact" of a 2002 consultant's report is apparently "a reflection of the pervasive lack of critical thinking" in the territorial government (284). And yet, in the very next paragraph, the authors explain how, in the same month the report was issued, a deputy minister began to organize a workshop of senior managers affected by decentralization to discuss ways to learn how best to operate in a decentralized

organizational structure (284). Moreover, in response to another consultant's report on decentralization, issued nearly a decade later, the GN effectively abandoned "the original objectives underpinning the decentralized model" (300). Is all of this political and bureaucratic attention characteristic of "malaise" and "a clerk's mentality" (287), or is it evidence of institutional learning and a willingness to adapt?

Perhaps other causes of policy failure noted by the authors deserve more rigorous testing. Alternative or competing explanations include insufficient investment in training and telecommunications infrastructure as well as unrealistically high expectations for the establishment of the GN.

This is no plea for abstraction. It is a desire to see the study of northern political institutions employ rigorous methodology to support its conclusions, and to use institutions such as decentralization or consensus government to question existing theories of government. Not doing the former risks influencing public opinion in a way that is unjust, even if unintended. Not doing the latter risks an unproductive and unrewarding narrowing of the study of northern politics.

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*The views expressed here are his own.